DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 481 983 EA 032 839

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TITLE	Charter Schools Under Construction: An Analysis of a Charter School Evaluation Plan.
PUB DATE	2000-11-12
NOTE	14p.; Paper presented at the Southern Regional Council on Educational Administration Conference (Nashville, TN, November 11-13, 2000).
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; Accountability; *Charter Schools; *Educational Assessment; Educational Environment; Elementary Secondary Education; *Evaluation Methods; Institutional Characteristics; *Institutional Evaluation; Nontraditional Education; Program Evaluation; *School Effectiveness; School Organization

ABSTRACT

After more than 10 years into the charter-school movement, a fundamental issue remains to be addressed, according to this paper. The issue reduces the charter movement down to its basic core premise, which is effectiveness. The question for all stakeholders is how effective is the charter-school model. Evaluation within the context of the charter-school movement can be understood to mean the systematic assessment of the charter-school program for the purpose of school improvement. The paper claims that the charter-school evaluation process remains under construction with plenty of work remaining to be done. The paper presents a charter-school evaluation plan with that issue in mind. The plan reflects current best practices of charter-school evaluation. The paper focuses on three areas: (1) the evaluation criteria of the charter school under examination; (2) the relationship of the evaluation process to charter-school effectiveness; and (3) the problems and promises of the charter-school plan. The paper concludes that evaluation should be both formative and summative in scope. The evaluation approach should be manageable and reasonable in dimension and intent, and should address the relational and quantifiable problems. (WFA)

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Southern Regional Council on Educational Administration Conference in Nashville, TN on November 12, 2000

ED 481 983

Charter Schools Under Construction: An Analysis Of A Charter School Evaluation Plan

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Introduction

Starting with Minnesota in 1992 and continuing on to Arkansas in 1999, the number of charter schools has continued to grow to a record number of more than 1,400 in thirty-two states and the District of Columbia (Bruno, Finn, Bierlein, & Vanourek, 1998; United States Department of Education, 2000). A total of thirty-six states and the District of Columbia have charter school legislation in place. Collectively, charter schools are estimated to have an enrollment in excess of a quarter million student with the majority of them enrolled in Arizona, California, and Michigan (United States Department of Education, 2000). Even the most pessimistic projections suggest that the number of charter schools will continue to increase as the demand for school improvement and accountability remain a priority issue in public education (Rose,1999).

The charter school laws in the various states are based on the proposition that allowing schools autonomy from existing bureaucratic and regulatory constraints will enable them to adopt innovative and productive methods of operation, finance, and governance to support the improvement of teaching and learning (Education Commission of the States, 1995). In addition, proponents argue that charter schools will increase the number of educational options within the public school system. Most importantly, charter schools represent a shift from rule-based accountability to performance-based accountability (Bierlein, 1996). In exchange for freedom from bureaucracy, schools agree to be held accountable for student performance. As such, they offer one model for fundamental reform of the system of schooling (Hill, 1996).

Nine years into the charter school movement, a fundamental issue remains to be addressed. The issue reduces the charter movement to down to its basic core premise

which is effectiveness (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 1981). The question for all stakeholders is: How effective is the charter school model? This question seems to have multiple responses ranging from poor, fair, great--depending on whom you ask and your yardstick. The question, however, generates a myriad of other crucial questions about charter school effectiveness. All of the questions illustrate the difficult in determining and measuring effectiveness. For instance: Can effectiveness be defined as filled classrooms? Can the number of charter schools in existence define effectiveness? Can effectiveness be defined by student achievement? Can effectiveness be defined as accessibility for all groups? Can effectiveness be defined as having a positive impact on other public schools? Numerous other measures indicating program effectiveness could also be asked. Unfortunately, the responses may vary and further complicate the issue of charter school effectiveness.

Singularly these questions will not be adequate in addressing the issue of school effectiveness because the issue is extremely complex in the same manner that it is for traditional schools. At the same time, collectively these questions may or may not be adequate in addressing the charter effectiveness issue because the current evaluation approach is too wide and diverse (See Table One). Nationally, the majority of charter schools use at least five or more assessment methods of which more than one-third use seven assessment methods (United States Department of Education, 2000). Furthermore, the current approach rest on the assumption that the seven more common assessment methods are relational in nature and that the relationship between all of the methods can be quantified. In addition, it is assumed that other assessment methods being used, by choice or are through mandate, are compatible with the seven more common assessment

methods and that they are also relational and quantifiable. At best, the relationship between some of the assessment methods is murky, therefore, so is the relationship between them (Worthen & Sanders, 1987).

Evaluation within the context of the charter school movement can be understood to mean the systematic assessment of the charter school program for the purpose of school improvement. Nationally, the overwhelming majority of charter schools are using multiple assessment methods including standardized assessment through norm referenced and criterion referenced assessments, performance assessments, student portfolios, student demonstrations, parent surveys, student interviews or surveys, and behavioral indicators to determine charter school success (United States Department of Education, 2000). In addition, some charter schools are assessed on how well they use their financial resources, comply with educational regulations, enhance student attendance, manage student discipline, and implement best instructional practices. Still others are being required to ascertain the instructional, administrative and district related cost associated with charter schools (See Table Two). In essence, the charter school evaluation process remains under construction with plenty of a work remaining to be done.

A charter school evaluation plan will be presented with that issue in mind. The plan reflects current best practices of charter school evaluation. The researchers will focus the discussion on three areas. First, the evaluation criteria of the charter school under examination will be discussed. Second, the relationship of the evaluation process to charter school effectiveness will be discussed. Summary comments will be offered about what happens when the evaluation process is expected to contain all the gifts in Pandora's

Box and the implications this has when the focus is on the gitts and not the meaning of those gifts.

An Elementary Charter School Evaluation Plan

The evaluation plan presented is the actual plan for an elementary charter school in a southern state in the United States. The school has come into existence this year and is serving about a hundred at-risk students. The goals of the charter school are to provide: (a) an effective early intervention/prevention for academic underachievement, (b) an effective early intervention/prevention for socio-behavioral and personal failure, and (c) an aggressive approach to rebuilding community and parent identity and support for public education through an innovative national model.

The evaluation approach used by the school is to assist them in determining program effectiveness. The effectiveness of the charter school will be determined by whether or not at-risk 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade students, enrolled in the charter school, learn and perform significantly better than comparable students not in the charter school on a variety of achievement and other schooling variables (i.e., grades, attendance, discipline, constituent satisfaction, instructional strategies, charter school impact, and cost of instruction, administration and transportation). In addition, students leaving the charter school will be tracked and achievement as well as other data will be collected and evaluated. The achievement of those students will be compared to students attending the charter school.

The evaluation approach is considered to be comprehensive and the assessment methods appropriate to determine charter school effectiveness. The evaluation approach with its numerous assessment methods will be discussed (See Table Three).

Baseline Data

To facilitate the evaluation process, baseline data on Rausch (RIT) growth data for students in grades 3rd through 5th will be collected along with data from other tests, however, since baseline data is not available for the other tests, descriptive statistics will be reported for student scores on the state benchmark exam for 4th grade, the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT-9) exam for 5th grade, and the school district's 2nd and 3rd quarter criterion referenced tests.

In addition, grades, attendance, and discipline data, where appropriate, will be collected.

Academic Achievement Data

Academic achievement will be measured using several different tests. First, Rausch (RIT) growth from the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Level Test for grades 3rd through 5th . Expected growth will be derived from a national comparison group of 500,000 students taking the NWEA level tests. The expected growth rate is an increase of 4% in reading, 5% in math, and 3% in language; second, the state benchmark exam for 4th grade; third, the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT-9) exam for 5th grade; and fourth, the school district's 2nd and 3rd quarter criterion referenced tests. The expected growth rate is a 10% decrease in students scoring below the norm in language arts, reading, and mathematics on the state benchmark exam, SAT-9 exam, and the school district's criterion referenced tests.

Other Schooling Variables

In additional to the academic achievement data, other relevant quantitative and qualitative data will be collected and evaluated. For example, grades, attendance,

discipline, constituent satisfaction, instructional strategies, charter school impact, and cost of instruction, administration and transportation.

Charter School Effectiveness

The evaluation process is used to identify needs, set priorities among needs and to translate needs into program objectives or facilitate the modifications of existing objectives (Sanders, 1992). The evaluation process is supposed to be able to gauge program effectiveness. In essence, the more successful a charter school is in meeting its assessment criteria the more effective it is deemed. The elementary school under discussion has a total of fourteen assessment methods.

Singularly, none of the methods used will be able to determine whether or not the stated goals of the charter school are met, i.e., it is an effective early intervention/prevention for academic underachievement program, it is an effective early intervention/prevention program for socio-behavioral and personal failure, and it is an aggressive approach to rebuild community and parent support for public education through an innovative national model Collectively, the methods used will probably not be able to determine whether or not at-risk 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade students learn and perform significantly better than comparable students on a variety of achievement measures and other schooling variables (grades, attendance, discipline, constituent satisfaction, instructional strategies, charter school impact, and cost of instruction, administration and transportation) because of the relational and quantifiable problems associated with the assessment approach (See Table Four). For instance, what is the relationship between student achievement test scores and student discipline? Can the relationship between student performance and charter school impact on the district be

quantified? Even if the relationship between achievement test scores and instructional cost be quantified the issue of what does it mean arises. Answers to these questions and dozens of more indicate the difficulty associated with having an evaluation approach that uses so many assessment methods.

Pandora's Box and Charter School Evaluation

Evaluation as a process should be focused on program needs, processes or strategies for providing services to learners, resource allocation, and program outcomes. Evaluation should be both formative and summative in scope. The evaluation approach should be manageable and reasonable in dimension and intent. Finally, the evaluation approach should pre-address the relational and quantifiable problems.

The elementary charter school plan under discussion is typical. It is comprehensive to the point of perhaps being inadequate. It has a little bit of everything in it so that it can response to all possible concerns. As such, it contains all of the gifts in Pandora's Box. It also contains the problems that arise when evaluation tries to be all things to all people at the same time. The central issue for evaluators of charter schools is to recognize this fact.

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Table 1

Types of Assessments
Standardized Assessment
Criterion Referenced Assessment
Norm Referenced Assessment
Performance Assessments
Student Portfolios
Student Demonstrations of Their Work
Parent Satisfaction Surveys
Student Interviews or Surveys
Behavioral Indicators

Table 2

Other Types of Assessments
Use of Financial Resources
Comply with State and Federal Regulations
Impact on Student Attendance
Instructional Practices
Impact on Other Schools
Cost of Instruction
Administrative Cost
District Related Cost

Table 3

Elementary
School Charter School Types of Assessments

Standardized Assessment

Criterion Referenced Assessment: School District Benchmark Tests (2nd & 3rd quarters), State Benchmark Test (4th grade)

Norm Referenced Assessment: Stanford Achievement Test (5th grade) & Northwest Evaluation Association Level Tests (3rd –5th grades)

Performance Assessments

Grades

Parent Satisfaction Surveys

Student Interviews or Surveys

District Impact Surveys

Use of Financial Resources

Comply with State and Federal Regulations

Impact on Student Attendance

Impact on Student Discipline

Instructional Practices

Impact on Other Schools

Cost of Instruction

Administrative Cost

District Related Cost: Transportation & Related Start Up Cost

Table 4

Relational and Quantifiable Problems of the Charter Elementary School Assessment Method

Questions to Highlight the Problems

What is the relationship between student academic achievement and student discipline? Measurable? Quantifiable?

What is the relationship between student performance and charter school impact on the district? Measurable? Quantifiable?

What is the relationship between student academic achievement and instructional cost? Measurable? Quantifiable?

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